

6. Signs

Traditionally, commercial signs have been a part of the character of downtown San Antonio. Early photographs include a variety of signs, which occurred in seven types.

The following types of signs have traditionally been used on Houston Street:

- Medium-sized, square or rectangularly-shaped signs that projected from the building above the awnings or canopies; printed on both sides.
- Small, horizontally-oriented rectangular signs that protruded from the building below the awnings or canopies but above pedestrians' heads; printed on both sides.
- Medium- to large-sized, horizontally-oriented rectangular signs attached flat against the building, above and/or below the awnings; printed on one side only.
- Medium- to large-sized, horizontally-oriented rectangular signs attached above and to the front of the awnings; printed on one side only.
- Medium- to large-sized, horizontally- and vertically-oriented signs painted on the building; mural signs. (Historically these were mostly located adjacent to the cornice or upper corner of a blank wall on the side of the building.)
- Large “blade” signs (i.e., vertically-oriented, tall signs) that projected from the second or third/fourth floors of a building, above awnings or canopies; printed on both sides.
- Window signs, painted on glass; used at the street level and on upper floors.



Historically, signs that were mounted on the exterior advertised the primary business of a building. This medium sized blade sign projects from the third floor of the building and was the only sign that advertised for this building, in this case the name of the building and the business were the same. The Frost Building still stands today. Photo ca. 1930's.

Historically, signs that were mounted on the exterior of a building advertised the primary business conducted in the building. Typically, these signs occupied a street level space and sometimes upper floors as well. Window signs were the only ones used for businesses above the street level business. In the case of a large structure that included several businesses on upper floors, the name of the building itself was displayed on an exterior sign. Tenants relied on a directory at the street level.

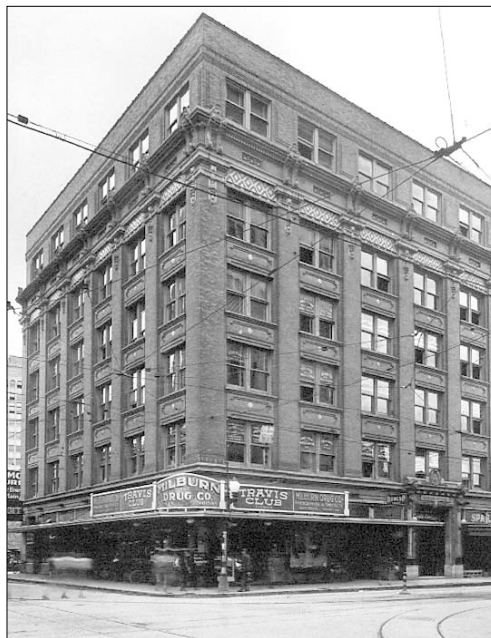
Historically sign sizes varied. Most signs were a few square feet in area, but some of the blade signs were quite large. In general, these larger signs were for a cultural or institutional facilities, such as a theater, or for an office block. In a few instances, major retailers also used them.

The earliest signs had no lights, but in time a variety of methods were used. Many signs in the early twentieth century had incandescent lamps focused on the sign panel. By the 1930s, some were outlined in lights; and by the 1950s, neon appeared occasionally.

Even so, throughout the history of the area signs have remained subordinate to the architecture. While some large signs have existed, they were relatively limited in number, such that one's overall ability to perceive the character of sets of buildings was maintained. Therefore, the key unifying features of the area, including the alignment of first floor elements and the rhythm of building fronts and windows, have remained clearly visible.

In addition, signs were mounted to fit within architectural features. In many cases, they were mounted flush above the storefront, just above moldings. Others were located between columns or centered in “panels” on a building face. This method of sign usage helped enhance the design character of individual structures.

Therefore, the tradition of having a diversity of signs that remain subordinate to the overall context and signs complementing architectural compositions, should be maintained.



As early as 1925, medium- to large-sized, horizontally-oriented rectangular signs attached above and to the front of the awning could be found.

The Sign Context

A sign typically serves two functions: first, to attract attention; and second to convey information, essentially identifying the business or services offered within. If it is well designed, the building front alone can serve the attention-getting function, allowing the sign to focus on conveying information in a well-conceived manner. All new signs should be developed with the overall context of the building and the area in mind.

6.1 Consider the building front as part of an overall sign program.

- Coordinate a sign within the overall facade composition.
- A sign should be in proportion to the building, such that it does not dominate the appearance.
- Develop a master sign plan for the entire building; this should be used to guide individual sign design decisions.

6.2 A sign should be subordinate to the overall building composition.

- A sign should appear to be in scale with the facade.
- Locate a sign on a building such that it will emphasize design elements of the facade itself. On an historic building a sign should not obscure architectural details or features.
- Mount a sign to fit within existing architectural features. Use the shape of the sign to help reinforce the horizontal lines of moldings and transoms seen along the street.



Roof mounted signs may be considered.

Appropriate Sign Types

6.3 A flush-mounted wall sign may be considered.

- When feasible, place a wall sign such that it aligns with others on the block.
- When planning a wall sign, determine if decorative moldings exist that could define a “sign panel.” If so, locate a flush-mounted sign such that it fits within a panel formed by moldings or transom panels. When mounted on a building with historic significance, a sign should not obscure significant facade features.

6.4 A projecting (blade) sign may be considered.

- A small blade sign should be located near the business entrance, just above the door or to the side of it.
- A large blade sign should be mounted higher, and centered on the facade or positioned at the corner.
- Note that other approvals may be required to allow a sign to overhang the public right-of-way.

6.5 A window sign may be considered.

- A window sign may be painted on or applied to a window.
- A window sign should cover no more than approximately twenty-five percent (25%) of the total window area.
- It may be applied to the glass or hung just inside the window.

6.6 A directory sign may be considered.

- Group small, individual signs on a single panel as a directory to make them easier to locate.



Preserve an historic sign where it exists, when feasible.

Sign Materials

6.7 Sign materials should be compatible with that of the building facade.

- Painted wood and metal are appropriate materials for signs. Their use is encouraged. Unfinished materials, including unpainted wood, are discouraged because they are out of character with the context.
- Highly reflective materials that will be difficult to read are inappropriate.
- Painted signs on blank walls were common historically and may be considered.



Using a symbol for a sign is encouraged.

Sign Content

6.8 Using a symbol for a sign is encouraged.

- A symbol sign adds interest to the street, can be read quickly and is remembered better than written words.

6.9 Use colors for the sign that are compatible with those of the building front.

6.10 A simple sign design is preferred.

- Typefaces that are in keeping with those seen in the area traditionally are encouraged.
- Also, limit the number of colors used on a sign. In general, no more than three colors should be used.

6.11 Select letter styles and sizes that will be compatible with the building front.

- Avoid hard-to-read or overly intricate typeface styles.

6.12 Preserve an historic painted sign where it exists, when feasible.



Painted window signs were used historically, as shown in this early photo detail, and are appropriate sign types for Houston Street.

Sign Lighting

6.13 Indirect lighting is preferred for a sign.

- Indirect lighting (i.e., that which is directed at a sign from an external, shielded lamp) is preferred.)
- A warm light, similar to daylight, is preferred.

6.14 If internal illumination is used, it should be designed to be subordinate to the overall building composition.

- Internal illumination of an entire sign panel is discouraged. If internal illumination is used, a system that backlights sign text only is preferred.
- Neon and other tubular illumination may be considered. However, use neon in limited amounts so that it does not become visually obtrusive.



Indirect lighting, that which is directed at a sign from an external, shielded lamp, is preferred.



Neon and other tubular illumination may be considered. However, use neon in limited amounts so that it does not become visually obtrusive, as is shown in this image.